

CHAPTER 1

London --- 1931

Cigar smoke swirled in the back seat of the black Rolls-Royce Phantom II parked across from #8 Kings Street. The man in the black derby and heavy great-coat nervously leaned forward watching the doorway of the Georgian granite building through the cold December drizzle. He angrily muttered, "So, the Huber family Emerald is sitting in there right now. I'm so close to getting it back I can feel it in my hand. After all these years our Emerald will belong again to the family." Turn the defroster up a bit; the windows are fogging up again." He blew another puff of gray smoke into the interior of the limousine as if it could block out the noise from the steady stream of honking cars, taxis, and red double-decker buses made their deliberate way towards Clarence House. During the last two weeks, the sun had hardly broken through the damp London fog long enough to prove the sky might still be blue. No exception today. As the smoker watched, a man stood at the door of Christie's and shook the silver rain droplets from his umbrella. "There comes the Director. It's about time for me to go inside and retrieve our lost inheritance."

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Bixby Reynolds entered the vestibule of Christie's London Auction House with great anticipation. Stamping the water off his black rubbers and shaking his black Brolly, he shoved it in the umbrella stand near the entrance. Striding down the green-carpeted corridor, he nodded slightly to several of his employees, careful to keep a casual distance appropriate to his stature as Managing Director. Auction day started promptly at ten each Monday morning with several things on his mind. Had the catalog been printed, and the auction room cleaned? Would there be a good crowd in spite of the rain? Soon, I hope, the gallery will soon fill with on-lookers, the rich, their agents and other hopefuls. Bixby, always nervous on auction day, but especially today, because of the impressive collection of jewels from the Bavarian National Treasury, were to be offered. He walked to his private office sanctum, hung his derby and greatcoat on the hall-tree inside the door. Every time he entered his office, he unconsciously imagined what impression it gave any newcomer. In the large room with the massive burlled walnut partners desk resting on the large, antique, Sultanabad Persian Rug, fine art on the walls, an antique with time-worn distinction, he knew it reflected his prominent position as Director at Christie's.

As if listening for Bixby's entrance, his personal secretary entered from the inner door. As he moved to sit behind his desk, she placed a small silver tray on his desk, and announced, "Your tea, sir."

"Thank you, Miss McIntyre, any mail?"

"Not until after nine, sir."

"Yes, of course."

"Will there be anything else?"

“Not for the moment. Please let me know as soon as our guests begin to arrive.”

“Certainly, sir,” and with a slight nod, she left the office without a smile.

Henry Jones, Bixby’s young assistant, tapped on the jam of the open door. Bixby wondered whether Jones’ ruddy complexion could be Welsh or because he drank too damn much, and never associating with employees outside Christies, he would never know why Jones didn’t have his suits pressed more often.

“Anything special for me this morning, sir?”

“Ah, Jones, come in. Are the catalogs ready?”

“Yes, sir, I instructed the clerks to place them on the usual table at the building’s entrance. I’m sure they’re ready. And the gallery is spotless.” Henry knew Bixby would throw one of his tantrums if there if he found a bit of dust anywhere before the sale. The Director carried a pair of white gloves in his coat pocket for conducting his pre-sale inspections.

“Good, good, all, for now, Jones. Oh...Jones, put a carnation in your buttonhole, please. We must keep up appearances, mustn’t we?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry bristled. He hated his superior always found something wrong with his appearance, no matter how hard he tried to be perfect. And, he hated being called just “Jones.” Bixby looked down on anyone not born in jolly old England, and because of Henry’s Welsh background, he was sure he had been bypassed for promotion several times. If I had the nerve, I’d go right to the old sod. I’d give him a piece of my mind. Someday, he thought. He turned and marched back to his small office, vowing again to look for a position in another firm.

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Back at his desk, Henry picked up today's thick catalog lying on his desk filled with pages of beautiful antiques, artworks, and jewelry. He sat down looking at all the fascinating items, starting with the Rembrandt and Goya paintings featured in the fine arts section, and paused. I wonder how it would feel to have such paintings hanging on the walls of my flat instead of seeing them in a museum. Bypassing pages of beautiful furniture, he stopped at the fine jewelry section, his favorite part of their catalogs. He had a fixation to possess one of those beautiful jewels someday, even a small one. Closing his eyes, he dreamed of giving a beautiful sparkling necklace to his wife. Coming out of his reverie, Henry checked his watch: time to make sure the men had prepared the items for auction in the proper sequence. He left his office, striding into the large holding hall behind the auction gallery where he checked to make sure each item had a corresponding number to the catalog. When he got to the jewelry section, he stopped. Would he be allowed to enter the vault to prepare the jewelry for display? But only Bixby could handle the gems. Only Bixby could open and enter the vault. Bixby explained it as a requirement of the company's insurance policy, but Henry knew better.

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In his office, Bixby nervously glanced at the Mummery & Sons oak wall clock opposite his desk. Have I taken care of everything? He mentally checked off the items on his Auction Day checklist, a process he went through each morning of every auction. Yes, he assured himself; all the details were in place. He hoped for a large crowd of bidders and a substantial profit for the company.

At nine thirty-five, on the dot, Bixby finished his morning tea and rose from his desk. Now time to open the safe and place the gems into their numbered velvet pouches.

Outside the vault room, he greeted the two waiting security officers: "James, Owen. Good morning. Keep a keen eye out today. We have a beautiful display for this auction."

"Something special today, Gov?" Owen asked, moving closer to the vault door.

"I'll say! A large lot of beautiful jewels and one of the biggest emeralds you'll ever see."

Bixby hunched over the combination dial obscuring the view from James and Owen. As he twirled the dial on the front of the huge safe, hearing a click, turned the other way, another click, slowly and carefully, this time, the final click. With a hard turn of the large lever, he swung the heavy door open and entered the vault's interior. The security officers held their ground, standing at attention outside the vault door. In a few moments, Bixby came out of the vault pushing an oak file cabinet on soft rubber wheels. He paused, opened one of the top drawers and took out a silver box. Putting on white cloth gloves, he opened the box and removed a black velvet bag.

"Feast your eyes on this beauty, gentlemen," as Bixby reached into the pouch and gently withdrew an emerald the size of his fist. It caught the overhead lights and sent a flash of green around the room.

"Good Lord, Mr. Bixby, it's the biggest emerald I ever seen," James remarked.

"It's the largest jewel of any kind I've ever seen. Outside of the Crown Jewels in the Tower, I mean," Owen said in awe.

"It is, lads, and it's worth a fortune."

"Where did it come from, sir?"

“This one’s the famous Wittelsbach Emerald, part of the collection of jewels from the Bavarian National Treasury. I guess we’d better get these beauties out of the holding area. Stay close to me, boys, and don’t let these out of your sight all day.”

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“Sold to number 317,” the sword-thin auctioneer exclaimed pounding his gavel as he stood facing the packed gallery. Some bidders had even lined the back wall, standing. The expectant air in the room reflected on the faces of the crowd. A white-smocked attendant walked onto the stage, and all eyes followed in anticipation. With white gloves, he removed a black velvet pouch from an ornate silver box and placed it on a revolving stand beside the auctioneer’s podium. Loosening the drawstring on the pouch, he carefully drew out the large green stone, laid it gently on top of the velvet bag. He turned and took his place against the wall to the left of the auctioneer’s podium. As if orchestrated by some unseen conductor, the audience gasped. Those in the rear stood to get a better look; others shifted their chairs for a less obstructed view.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the auctioneer looked over the gathered crowd, and in an excited timbre spoke again, “we have now come to item number one-thirty-eight in your catalog, the pièce de résistance of this auction if I may say so. I’m sure you have already read the provenance of this magnificent emerald, but let me share the description again for you.

“A 98.98 carat, superb quality, natural hexagonal crystal, part of the Wittelsbach collection, until recently, housed in the Bavarian Treasury of Residenz in Munich, Germany. We are fortunate today to have this glorious emerald on offer. Originally, this dark green emerald with bluish highlights came from the Muzo Mines of Columbia in the

16th century. History suspects Conquistador Francisco Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada brought it to Spain in 1538 and presented it to Queen Isabella. Historians tell us in the seventh century Philip IV of Spain gave it to Margareta Teresa as part of her dowry when she married Leopold I of Austria. During this time, the emerald became part of the Bavarian National Treasury and became known as the Wittelsbach Emerald, after the name of the ruling family. It is believed to have been a gift from King Ludwig the First, of Bavaria to Lola Montez, the 19th-century courtesan, but the stone returned to the Treasury when Miss Montez mysteriously left Munich. Now, and for unknown reasons, the Bavarian government is selling a considerable number of its treasures, and Christies has the rare privilege of offering this exquisite piece of nature. This magnificent gem became part of the Huber family of Munich, who held it for several years until financial difficulties forced them to sell it back to their government.”

Murmurs and muted chuckles came from the gallery. He added, “Bavaria, weakened by King Ludwig’s sentimental extravagances never fully recovered. So, once again, this glorious Wittelsbach Emerald is on the market. As you have learned, this beautiful stone has a long and fascinating history.”

Standing behind the auctioneer, Bixby observed the crowd, studying the faces and posture of the audience, trying to guess which person would bid on this item. After all these years watching guests at the auctions, he prided himself adept at predicting who would open on a particular offering. While the auctioneer read the provenance, he sensed a general feeling of excitement swelling throughout the room. Several patrons were nervously playing with their assigned numbered paddles.

The bidding opened. Bixby knew by name several of those who raised their paddles. Lord Perth sat with his lovely young second wife who had been a dancer in a London club when he met her. After a not-so-secret love affair, he divorced his wife, to marry her. Now Lord Perth tried desperately to keep up with his new spouse and her spending sprees.

Looking over the crowd, he recognized the agent for Sir Basil Giles, apparently hoping to add another famous gem to his client's already extensive collection. He saw Paddy Drexler, recently elected to the House of Commons. And, he noticed a new bidder from Paris, who represented some wealthy industrialist from France, neither of whom he met before the auction. Also, he saw a nervous man, older than the rest, sitting near the rear of the gallery and holding a black derby. As the bidding for the emerald started, this man rose from his chair and slipped along the sidewall, closer to the podium. He seemed to be trying to get both an unobstructed view of the emerald and to be simultaneously seen by the auctioneer. Bearded and wearing thick glasses, impeccably dressed in a dark gray pin-stripe suit of European cut, he patted his thigh lightly with his numbered paddle.

Bixby saw something intense about this man, almost a crouching tiger ready to spring.

There's the one. He knew it.